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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 BEIRUT 001865

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NSC FOR ABRAMS/SINGH/GAVITO/YERGER

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TAGS: PGOV PREL SY FR PTER LE

SUBJECT: LEBANON: GEAGEA AGAINST LAF COMMANDER SLEIMAN FOR PRESIDENT

REF: BEIRUT 1854

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Classified By: Ambassador Jeffrey D. Feltman for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d) .

SUMMARY

¶1. (C) March 14 leaders are back at the drawing board brainstorming how to break the political impasse over the presidency. In an 11/25 meeting with the Ambassador, Lebanese Forces leader Samir Geagea rejected Saad Hariri's plan to elect Lebanese Armed Forces (LAF) Commander Michel Sleiman (reftel), asserting that Sleiman has a history of taking direct orders from Syria.

¶2. (C) Instead, Geagea wants March 14 to return to the idea of electing a president with an absolute majority. He proposed several scenarios for lists of candidates. He supports submitting the Patriarch's list, submitting a new list drawn up by March 14 leaders or submitting only two names from the Patriarch's list: the octogenarians Michel Khoury and Michel Edde, with the expectation that neither candidate would serve a full six-year term. He expects that March 14 will need approximately two weeks to fully unite on this idea, and the success of this strategy depends upon the U.S. and Europe demonstrating strong and unequivocal support of such strength that the pro-Syrians would take notice. End summary.

SLEIMAN IS AN AGENT OF SYRIA

¶3. (C) The Ambassador, accompanied by PolOff, met with head of Lebanese Forces (LF) Samir Geagea, his wife MP Setrida Geagea, and advisor Elie Khoury at his home in Marab on November 25. Without the Ambassador disclosing majority leader Saad Hariri's plan B to elect Lebanese Armed Forces (LAF) Commander Michel Sleiman as president (reftel), Geagea initiated the conversation by mentioning his own recent meeting with Sleiman, providing the pretext for what he imagined would come as a surprise to the Ambassador - that Hariri was now pushing for Sleiman. He praised Sleiman for the current stability in the absence of a president, then suggested that this stability was not solely because of Sleiman. Geagea suspects that Syria is pushing for stability in Lebanon to give Hizballah and Michel Aoun the opportunity to strengthen themselves during the presidential vacuum. He

dismissed the idea that Sleiman was ensuring stability at the urging of March 14 or the U.S., but claimed instead he was responding directly to orders from Hizballah and its allies. Moreover, Geagea added, Sleiman's ambition for his own presidency is guiding his behavior.

¶4. (C) Geagea revealed to the Ambassador that Hariri approached Geagea on November 23 to propose Sleiman's candidacy. Geagea immediately responded by saying PM Fouad Siniora was opposed to the idea, but Hariri countered that Siniora and Druse leader Walid Jumblatt were now on board. Geagea did not give an immediate answer to Hariri, but told the Ambassador that he was opposed to Sleiman's candidacy, and believed that Hariri and Jumblatt were supporting him out of fear of chaos. In Geagea's recent meeting with Sleiman, Geagea reported that Sleiman was disgruntled because he believed "the constitution discriminated against those in the army." (Note: The constitution stipulates that senior government officials, like Sleiman, spend two years out of office before being eligible to run for president. End note.)

HALF PLUS ONE OR BUST

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¶5. (C) Geagea is ready for bold moves. He recounted multiple instances when March 14 was threatened by Hizballah but persisted, and violence did not occur. He concluded that the fear factor motivating Hariri and Jumblatt was moot. Having laid out his justifications, he then proposed that the time was right for the March 14 majority to move forward with the risky step of electing a president with a half plus one majority. Geagea acknowledged that he had previously been tempering March 14 leaders, including Hariri, against such a move, but advocated it now because he sees the presidential election as a pivotal point for the future of March 14. He laid out scenarios of a slippery slope by which Hizballah

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increasingly gains control of Lebanon - first, with the presidency, then the prime minister and the cabinet, and so forth. Geagea believes that March 14 must remain united and confront Hizballah at every juncture, with the critical juncture being the presidency, adding that the election of Sleiman is the first step toward Hizballah domination.

TAKE ANY LIST TO PARLIAMENT

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¶6. (C) Geagea mulled over other options. He expressed a willingness to submit the Patriarch's list original list of candidates to parliament for a vote. He interpreted the existing calm to mean that March 14 could bring a desirable candidate such as Nassib Lahoud back to the table. March 14 could even be so bold, Geagea conjectured, as to come up with its own list and submit that to parliament. More than once, he interjected that he personally accepted Michel Edde as a candidate, but that he recognized Hariri's objections, and in the interest of a united March 14, he was consequently looking for a better solution. Alternatively, Geagea said he would support sending two names from the Patriarch's list, Michel Edde and Michel Khoury ("the two old men,") to parliament, adding confidently that Khoury was sure to win with the March 14 majority solidly behind him.

¶7. (C) It would be ideal, posited Geagea, if the French or the Patriarch publicly pushed for a half plus one majority. Geagea cited his friendship with French FM Bernard Kouchner as a possible way to connect with the French, and was hesitant in anticipating the Patriarch's reaction. Furthermore, Geagea continued, if March 14 is going to go as far as electing its favored candidate, Nassib Lahoud, then it would need the U.S. to take a strong position in defense of Lahoud, or more generally, of a half plus one majority. Geagea posited that an absolute majority would have a greater chance of success if the U.S. campaigned for it with its Arab allies, and react, perhaps with sanctions, against states

rejecting an absolute majority. He said that U.S. and European support was the key to getting Jumblatt on board. According to Geagea, Jumblatt most fears the West giving Syria a role in the international arena, which Syria would exploit to regain control over Lebanon. He guessed that March 14 leaders would require approximately two weeks to prepare for and unite behind moving ahead with half plus one.

AOUN IS NOT AN OBSTACLE

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¶ 8. (C) In response to the Ambassador's inquiry, Geagea said that head of Free Patriotic Movement Michel Aoun would not be able to discredit a president elected by a half plus one majority because such a president would be a strong president, assuming that the U.S. got the Arab and European states behind him so strongly that Syria and its allies would accept him as inevitable. In fact, Geagea added, a strong candidate would split Aoun's bloc because its members place a high priority on getting a president in Baabda and some MPs could abandon Aoun to win favor with whomever is in power. If Aoun sees that March 14 is serious, he would be more concerned about securing his own role and that of his bloc in the cabinet, than about denouncing the president, surmised Geagea.

COMMENT

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¶ 9. (C) We have emphasized to the Muslim leaders of March 14 and the GOL -- Saad Hariri, Walid Jumblatt, and Fouad Siniora -- that their "Sleiman option" is impossible to sell if the Christian side of March 14 does not agree. March 14 unity is essential to March 14 success now and in the future. Geagea's strong position indicated that Hariri et al. have a lot of homework to do to persuade Geagea to consider Michel Sleiman as an acceptable presidential candidate. When we raised this with Hariri, he replied, impatiently and grumpily, that Geagea should see that supporting Sleiman would "solve" the Lebanese Forces' civil war-era problems with the army (when Geagea's forces notoriously butchered army officers, in the general savagery of that period).

¶ 10. (C) But we note that Saudi Ambassador Abdulaziz Khoja visited Geagea at Saad's behest today, less than 24 hours

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after our meeting with Geagea. Khoja (who supports Sleiman's candidacy now, since he sees no way to get Nassib Lahoud into Baabda Palace) called us later to report that the meeting was "excellent." So we will see whether Geagea is moderating his opposition to Sleiman and perhaps, in the finest Lebanese tradition, starting to contemplate the price he would demand (in terms of shares of power) in return for supporting Sleiman.

¶ 11. (C) What was unthinkable only a week ago in March 14 circles -- a Sleiman presidency -- is under active consideration in March 14 circles today. That this is so, in the Alice-in-Wonderland world of Lebanese politics, stems in large part to the calculation by March 14's Muslim leaders that it's not worth taking risks on securing the right Christian presidency, when they can't be sure the world or even Lebanese public opinion is with them on ensuring that an absolute majority election can work. Geagea, at least as of last night, argues the opposite: that March 14 cannot risk losing the presidency. We'll see if Khoja is correct, that Geagea is now starting to come around to the idea. In any case, the March 14 Muslim-Christian divide revealed by this debate is worrying. While all of March 14 is united behind Nassib Lahoud, there appears to be no unity as to what is the best fall-back strategy.

FELTMAN